

Do you have a good recipe for stir-fried rattlesnake?

By Don Fallick

Generally speaking, I don't go looking for rattlesnakes. They keep the rodent population under control, and they seldom attack humans. Rattlers are afraid of people and don't associate with them by choice. I don't believe in disturbing the balance of nature if I can avoid it, but when I see one close to the house, I know something is wrong. Usually it means the pressure of overpopulation has forced it to go where no sane rattlesnake should be. The solution is to reduce the population.

At first it might seem that the best way to do this is to shoot the snake, using a gun loaded with snakeshot. It's quick, it's humane if you hit it in the head, and it keeps you out of striking distance of the snake. But you may not have a gun handy, and it's dangerous to shoot at a snake in close quarters without snakeshot because of the possibility of ric-



ochet. Whatever you do, you must do it fast or the snake will get away, only to threaten you or your family at another time. Luckily, rattlesnakes are rather easy to kill with a shovel or hoe.

The snake can only strike as far as its body length—a maximum of about three feet in most species. Even a short-handled shovel is longer than that. The best way to kill a rattler is to hack off its head with a hoe or shovel as it tries to slither away. Aim for the neck, behind the triangular head, to avoid squirting poison out of the poison sac in the back of the head. Another good strategy is to immobilize the snake's head with a rake or even a long, forked stick. Crush the head with a club of some kind or cut it off with an axe. A dead snake will thrash for quite a while after the spinal cord is severed. Also, the jaws may still bite reflexively, and the fangs may drip venom, so it's best to avoid picking up the head in your bare hand. I usually dig a hole deep enough that the dog won't dig it up, then bury the head under rocks. But I don't bury the body. I don't believe in wanton killing, and rattlesnakes make mighty fine eating.

People will tell you that rattlesnake meat tastes like chicken. Actually, it tastes like rattlesnake. It has a stronger flavor than chicken but a similar texture. While it can be prepared any way that chicken can, there's not as much meat on a snake as there is on a chicken. So it works out best in a dish where the meat is added for flavor, but is not the main ingredient. Stir-frying is the best way I have found to prepare fresh rattler. It's perfectly suited to the many small pieces of meat you'll end up with, and the subtle flavor blends well with the almost-fresh vegetables produced by stir-frying.

Skin the snake by grasping the neck in one hand and pulling the skin inside out. Filet the snake by stripping off the long muscles on either side of the spine, and throw the rest away. It's not worth the effort to get at. Cut the filets up into inch-long sections. They may still be twitching when you do this: reptiles take a long time to die, but never fear, cooking will render them thoroughly dead.

For stir-frying, you will need several cups of vegetables. The exact amount and kind of vegetables will vary, depending on availability, taste, and the number of people present who are willing to eat a snake.

1 rattlesnake, fileted
 1/2 sweet, white onion
 or 1 medium bunch of scallions, sliced thin
 1 or 2 bell peppers, red or green, sliced
 1 cup of mushrooms, sliced
 1 cup of bean sprouts
 1 cup of snap peas, snow peas, or immature green peas, in pods
 1 or 2 cups total of other fresh white, yellow, or green vegetables in season, sliced thin or diced
 1 cup of cooked white or brown rice per person
 1/2 cup of wok oil (see below)
 1 cup of commercial or homemade stir-fry sauce (see below)
 1 roll of paper towels
 or clean, disposable, cotton rags

Wok oil

Mix together:
 1/2 cup of olive or canola oil
 1 pressed clove fresh garlic
 or 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder (*Do not use garlic salt.*)

Stir-fry sauce

Mix until thoroughly blended:

1 cup soy sauce

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon powdered ginger

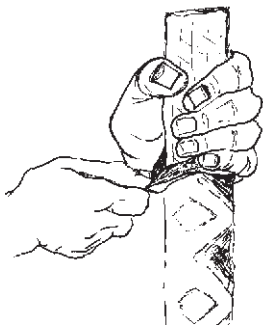
$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon powdered mustard

1 teaspoon sugar or honey

2 teaspoons catsup

Garlic and/or onion to taste

Slice the meat into thin strips. Slice the onion or scallions, bell peppers, mushrooms, and other large or thick vegetables into pieces thin enough that they will cook almost instantly. Keep each ingredient separate. Leave the pea pods and bean sprouts whole; they will cook quickly enough as is. The idea in stir-frying is to cook each kind of food at a very high temperature, very briefly. This allows the food to cook all the way through without losing its natural, "raw" flavor and texture. Flavors are not mixed until the very last, so the mixture tastes more like a salad than a stew. Begin by preparing the rice in your favorite way. While it is cooking, you'll do the stir-fry.



Nothing works as well for stir-fry as a wok, but if you don't have one, you can substitute a deep cast-iron skillet. Heat the wok very hot, then slide in a tablespoon of room-temperature wok oil and immediately dump in the snake meat. Turn constantly with a metal or wooden turner. Allow some of the meat to rest on the bottom of the wok for a few seconds only, then scrape it to the

side to stay warm while another portion of the meat is cooking. Cook the meat for one to two minutes only, until each piece is about half-cooked. Then set it aside in a covered dish or in a warm oven to keep warm until the vegetables are ready. Wipe the wok dry with a thickly-folded paper towel or clean, disposable cotton rag so the vegetables are not contaminated by the meat flavor while they are cooking. Heat the wok very hot again, and put in another tablespoon of room-temperature wok oil.

Cook each of the vegetables the same way. Add each kind of vegetable to the meat when it is half-cooked, and go on to the next vegetable. Dry the wok, reheat, and add fresh wok oil each time. This allows each kind of food to cook separately, sealing in the flavors so they don't mix. When they are all half-done, stir all the vegetables and the meat in the wok together; add half of the stir-fry sauce, cover, and cook at medium heat for one or two minutes, until the meat is done. Serve over rice. The rest of the stir-fry sauce can be added by each lucky diner, to taste. Δ

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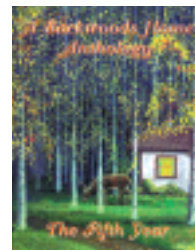
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